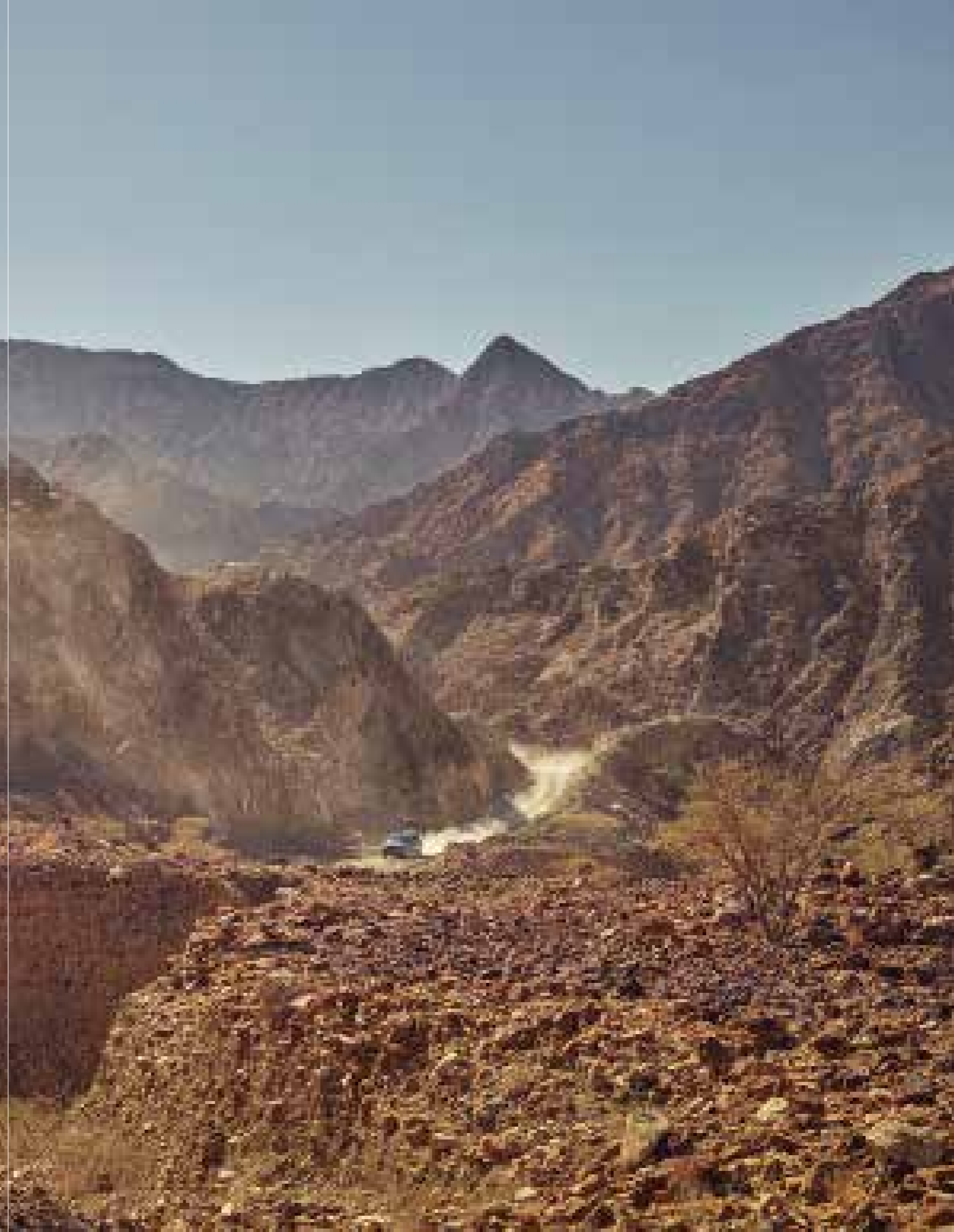


The oil-rich Gulf is not the obvious place to find a thriving cultural and environmental heritage. The Range Rover SVAutobiography goes into the heart of Arabia to find those leading the preservation of this ancient land

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T H E
W E A L T H
O F T H E
D E S E R T





THIS IS A
JOURNEY
INTO A
FUTURE
ARABIA
BEYOND THE
CITY LIMITS

“No man can live this life and emerge unchanged. He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert... for this cruel land can cast a spell which no temperate climate can match,” wrote Wilfred Thesiger in his seminal 1959 account, *Arabian Sands*.

Standing amid the scrubland and cranes of modern Dubai, it is clear that the spell in question is now one of fantastically tall glass towers, near-impossible dreams of palm-shaped islands and the biggest fish tank in the world. Still echoing with the strange magic of *The Thousand and One Nights*, Dubai seems almost an emporium of make-believe.

It is the jewel in the crown of the United Arab Emirates – a state that’s a mere 45 years old. This desert peninsula pointing north like an exclamatory finger between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean has seen unimaginable change in the past half century.

Its population has ballooned from that of a moderately sized English market town (about 70,000) to the equivalent of Greater London (around nine million). Almost all those people have come from the Indian subcontinent, leaving local Arabs as a tiny minority of little more than 10%.

The magnet that draws them is black gold – the oil wealth that pours day and night from beneath the sands of Arabia, driving an economic boom. Before its discovery, the nomadic Bedouin roamed the desert and outsiders ignored it completely.

When this story was written, there were over 65,000 hotel rooms to choose from in Dubai alone.

By the time you read this, that number will probably be out of date. They are aiming for 100,000 by the time of the Dubai World Expo 2020. Over 14 million visitors came through Dubai International Airport in 2015 in search of the highest penthouses and the biggest shopping malls. This town even has its own festival of shopping.

So, surely we’re going to wander the shining hotels and malls of Dubai? That’s what everyone else would do, but we are driving a long wheelbase Range Rover SVAutobiography – the most luxurious Land Rover ever. This car requires the less-beaten path, the unexpected delight of perspectives unseen from the city’s skyscrapers and visions that only the luxury of time and wide open spaces can reveal.

As we drive along the traffic-clogged Sheikh Zayed Road, horns blaring, endless billboards announcing the latest concept suburbs to be built on the city’s edge, we are aware at every turn of a faint rippling on the hazy horizon, in between the gleaming skyscrapers. It is sand dunes. It is the call of the desert.

INTO THE SAND DUNES

This is a journey into another Arabia. But it isn’t a nostalgia trip into a past of desert warriors and plucky British adventurers. It’s a journey into a future Arabia. Beyond the city limits, a different vision of this region’s future is being created. We head into the brick-red dunes that run inland from the coast. →



Clockwise from top left: leaving Dubai; at reception, Banyan Tree Al Wadi – the executive class rear seating of the Range Rover SVAutobiography features powered deployable tables, bottle chiller compartment, individual massage seats with power recline of up to 17 degrees and calf rests; a bedroom and plunge pool in one of the Banyan Tree Al Wadi’s tent-like villas





Clockwise from top left: the reception of the Banyan Tree Al Wadi is built in the mudbrick style of Ras al Khaimah with traditional latticework and lighting; Ryan Ingram, director of the Banyan Tree Al Wadi Nature Reserve; bird handler, Khan, with a desert eagle owl

At first glance, the untrained eye could be forgiven for thinking that nothing lives in this dry, scorched land. Actually, it's teeming with life.

"Desert foxes, indigenous cats, snakes, scorpions, gerbils," says Ryan Ingram, a conservationist who is director of the first nature reserve in the Emirate of Ras al Khaimah. He is listing just some of the local inhabitants of the five square kilometre reserve he has developed over the past decade.

"We started out with only one square kilometre and 16 animals. We now have a herd of 53, including the Arabian oryx (*maha*), the sand gazelle (*rheem*) and the Arabian gazelle (*doman*)," he says of the desert habitat, which is also home to the Banyan Tree Al Wadi resort. It lies in the rolling desert dunes of the western

coastal strip of the Musandam Peninsula and is a place where discerning visitors can gain a glimpse of real desert. Its individual tented villas, each with their own plunge pool, blend into the nature reserve in which the resort sits.



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NATIONAL PARKS

The land for the resort and reserve was granted by the Sheikh of Ras al Khaimah, eager to promote sustainability and the environment. "We have now presented him with a proposal for an expansion to a 1,700km² national park," says Ingram. "His response was, 'give me a business plan to cover the 13 million dirham fence and we'll talk about it'."

A national park might sound ambitious, but Ingram believes there is the demand for it. Not only are the species

they have reintroduced growing in number annually, the hotels of Ras al Khaimah are also full of visitors who want to get out and do something. By offering nature safaris, visitors would have a chance to connect with the local environment and culture.

What's more, the notion of a national park is not unprecedented. In the Emirate of Fujairah on the east coast, Wadi Wurayah – one of the region's finest natural sites – has been turned into the UAE's first national park and designated as a Wetland of International Importance by the Ramsar Convention. This unique freshwater site in a desert country supports close to 100 endemic species, covering 129km² with a further 92km² buffer zone.

The wadi is currently closed to the public while the municipality – in conjunction with Emirates Wildlife Society and WWF – work to restore a habitat that was severely degraded by careless overuse and littering. They have conducted extensive animal research, →

THE BIG LIST

You know Dubai has the world's tallest building and all the rest... Here's the big list you haven't read about before

THE COMEBACK ANTELOPE

The Arabian oryx was listed as extinct in the wild in the early 1970s. Its reintroduction in protected areas of the UAE and Oman has led to it being reclassified from endangered to vulnerable, the first animal ever to make that positive move. There are now over 1,000 individuals in the wild.

WORLD-FIRST HERITAGE PROJECT

The city of Sharjah is pursuing the largest heritage project in the region – Heart of Sharjah – with the goal of restoring historic neighbourhoods. It's the world's first development of its kind on this scale, is a candidate for UNESCO World Heritage status and is slated for final completion in 2025.

LARGEST BOTANIC GARDEN IN ARABIA

With only 120mm of rainfall per year, Oman might not seem like ideal gardening territory, but that hasn't stopped the development of the region's largest Botanic Garden to showcase the unique flora, landscapes and cultural traditions of Oman.

FIRST NATIONAL PARK

When the Emirate of Fujairah designated the wetland site of Wadi Wurayah as a 129km² protected area in 2009, it became the first national park in the UAE.

UNIQUE DRAGONFLY

Thought to have become extinct in 1957, the *urothemis thomasi* dragonfly had a range that only covered Oman. In June 2013, it was spotted in the UAE's Wadi Wurayah by a research manager with the Emirates Wildlife Society.



Left: entering the 36km canyon of Wadi Khab al Shamsi in Oman's Musandam Peninsula – the track narrows to just five metres wide with sheer 2,000-metre cliffs on either side. Right: in the Al Lisaili desert near Dubai



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aided by the latest drone technology. A group of students from the New York University Abu Dhabi has developed the Wadi Drone – a 2.2kg drone with a range of up to 40km that rangers use to roam the park's remote corners in high summer, collecting data on animal movements.

The use of modern technology to aid the preservation of local heritage is something that feels very appropriate in the UAE, and it's happening at the falconry on the Banyan Tree Al Wadi reserve, too. "The Bedouin traditionally used falcons as part of their survival," explains Ryan. "In the winter, when the birds migrate from Europe down to Africa, they'd capture them, train them for hunting and then release them again in April because in the summer they couldn't keep them alive. Today, our handlers like to showcase the modern method of falcon training – using a quadcopter drone."

One of the handlers, Khan, demonstrates how a quadcopter drone is fitted with a parachute attached to a dead quail. The drone is then launched to about 100m and the falcon is released. It is in the act of circling upwards towards its prey, which the falcon does instinctively, that the bird becomes fit and agile. Once it captures the quail, the parachute is released and the falcon takes its prey to ground. Ingram notes that these birds fly free. If they chose to, they could fly off at any moment. They only stay as long as the food is good. The same is true of the reserve's owls.

"We breed two owl species: the barn owl and the desert eagle owl. They are indigenous species and the majority of them, about 70%, we train to hunt and then release back into the wild."

INTO THE MOUNTAINS

Taking the road east from the Banyan Tree Al Wadi, the dunes give way to open, table-flat gravel plains from which, with great drama, the Hajjar mountain range rises. This jagged spine runs from the Strait of Hormuz way down to the fishing port of Sur at the eastern tip of Oman. It is in these mountains of dark shale-like rock that this country gets really wild, and really complex.

We take the Range Rover SVAutobiography up the winding Wadi Madha and soon run out of asphalt. It's time to employ the Mud and Ruts setting on our Terrain Response – a system that optimises traction on tough terrains by adapting your vehicle's responses.

At the beginning of the valley, the town of Madha is announced by Omani flags and the paternal face of the Sultan of Oman looking down from billboards. Not 10km further on, we enter the tiny settlement of Nahwa. Once more the flags come out, this time the pan-Arab red, green, white and black of the UAE. Soon we see portraits of Sharjah's ruling Al Qasimi family looking down upon us from hoardings. Yes, we are back in the UAE.

This strange corner of the region actually contains an enclave of the UAE, within an enclave of Oman, within the UAE. It is one of the greatest anomalies in the labyrinthine borders that were created when the locals got to choose their national allegiance. Further →



WE TURN
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CLIFF FACE

on, we re-enter Oman once more – this time, the exclave of the Musandam, running up to within a few kilometres of Iran.

We are here in search of yet another project reconnecting visitors with a more ancient past. Driving up the canyon-like Wadi Khab al Shamsi, we eventually turn down a road that appears to run into a cliff face. It is, in fact, the beginning of a switchback trail over the 2,000m-high mountains to an isolated bay where a unique resort lies.

The Six Senses Zighy Bay resort is only accessible by air, sea or four-wheel-drive vehicle. It was designed by Palestinian architect Mahfouz Shuhaiber in the same style as traditional Omani fishing villages, right down to the wattle and sandstone construction materials and recycled timber, natural ventilation and passive shading to protect against the intense summer heat. The buildings are clustered tightly together around narrow pathways in the sand. Intermingled among them stand 1,100 palms from which are harvested 12 different varieties of date.

The cooling drink you receive upon arrival is made from this harvest. It's sweet nectar after the arid drive over the mountains. The resort is actively working towards the goal of establishing a marine protected area on the reefs of the Musandam Peninsula, with plastic wrappings banned and fish sourced from local Omani fishermen.

We are told we are only two hours' drive from Dubai, but sitting in one of the small stone villas with only the sound of gentle waves lapping on the Gulf of Oman, it is easy to believe that the city – and everything that has happened in the last 50 years – is a very long way away indeed. □

Embark on your own Arabian adventure, visit banyantree.com or sixsenses.com

DRIVING ON SAND

Arabia has a lot of sand. When driving off-road you are likely to encounter dunes very quickly. This soft, fluid surface is unlike any other and requires its own unique skill set. Here are five Land Rover tips to remember

DEFLATE YOUR TYRES

Never attempt to drive off-road on sand dunes with the tyre pressure you use for road driving. The tyre needs to be deflated in order to maximise the length of tread that is in contact with the sand.

ENGAGE SAND MODE

Before heading into the sands, set your Terrain Response system to Sand Mode to optimise your vehicle's performance.

ALWAYS STOP DOWNHILL

This is the most vital piece of sand driving advice. Hill starts and sand dunes don't mix.

READ THE DUNES

Learn to judge the terrain ahead before you reach it. Use steady momentum on inclines and slow down at crests where sudden drops may be hidden.

AVOID SOFT DUNES

The vehicle can quickly become bogged down in soft, undisturbed sand. If this happens, engage All-Terrain Progress Control and the vehicle should dig itself out.



Left: guests can arrive at the Six Senses Zighy Bay resort by four-wheel drive, boat or paraglider from the mountain pass. Right: sunrise over the pool at Six Senses Zighy Bay's exclusive villa, The Retreat (annexe villa available for your au pair or bodyguards)

